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FOUNDATION****NATIONAL NEWS****Cases of Two Missing Black Women 'Solved'**

by Hazel Trice Edney

WASHINGTON (NNPA) – Two missing Black women who got little national news coverage to help solve their cases despite their families' pleadings have both been found murdered.

The badly decayed body of 24-year-old Tamika Huston of Spartanburg, S.C., was found Aug. 12, about 14 months after she was reported missing. Christopher Lemont Hampton, 25, a man she had reportedly been dating, was arrested and charged with her murder.

Slightly more than a week later, on Aug. 20, the body of 24-year-old Latoyia Figueroa of Philadelphia, Pa., missing little more than a month, was discovered in a grassy area of Chester, Pa., 10 miles west of Philadelphia.

Figueroa was five months pregnant and the mother of a 7-year-old daughter. Her ex-boyfriend, Stephen Poaches, has been arrested and charged with murder in the deaths of her and her unborn daughter.

The missing cases of both women sparked grassroots search efforts by many who complained that the news media appears to give inordinate coverage of missing White women and virtually ignore the plight of African-Americans.

Now that the more than a yearlong search for Huston is over, family and friends say they have found some closure, but will need time to heal from the trauma of months of searching.

"Oh my gosh, it was just terrible," recalls Holly Funk, who spoke with her niece, Huston, at least once a week before she disappeared. "Just not knowing was heart-aching. It's a shame the way she went, but at least we know now what really happened."

Instead of closure, Huston's best friend says the new developments reopened old wounds.

"When we couldn't find Tamika, I felt like I was going to have a nervous break down. I was on the verge of going to get nerve pills. I was not sleeping at night. I was scared to close my eyes because I felt like she was tugging at me," says Zelda Teamer, who had known Huston for a decade.

Teamer says she resolved months before the arrest and recovery of the remains that Huston, the godmother of her daughter, was dead after having a dream in which a "cheery" Huston consoled her, telling her that she was gone for good but she was alright.

"Then, when the remains were found, it opened up a new hole in my heart," says Teamer.

Huston's mother, Gabrilla Simehehe, and aunt, Rebkah Howard, told the NNPA News Service last month before the bodies were found, that they had been struck by the media coverage being accorded Natalie Holloway, missing in Aruba, and Lacy Peterson, whose husband is on death row for her murder in contrast to the scant attention given to Black cases.

Howard says after months of treating her niece's case almost like one of her public relations clients, she too must now take time to grieve.

"It was so important to me to keep her story alive and to keep that pressure on police," she says. "But, emotionally, I'm just now starting to deal with it as everything comes down."

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Though they occurred in different states, the killings of Huston and Figueroa were remarkably similar. Both men charged in the deaths claim to have gone into fits of rage in their apartments alone with the women.

According to various news accounts, Hampton said he hit Huston over the head with an iron after she allegedly challenged his refusal to lend her money.

Poaches claims to have accidentally strangled Figueroa "a little too long" after she allegedly struck him in the face and shoulder during an argument. According to the Associated Press, Poaches was arrested when he was caught trying to move her body from the wooded area where he had stashed her a month earlier.

Huston's family learned about Hampton's confession and the discovery of her remains in a phone call from the police to Howard, the aunt, on Aug 12. Hampton had been imprisoned on a parole violation as police built a case against him after finding Huston's blood on the carpet in his apartment. Police found the apartment after tracing a key to the front door among Huston's belongings.

Howard says the evidence against Hampton was bolstered by a tip called in to America's Most Wanted, which picked up the story nine months after Huston was reported missing. Another young woman being entertained by Hampton on the day that Huston was reported missing, says she saw blood on Hampton's bedroom floor, according to Howard.

Detectives served Hampton with the murder warrant on the day he was to be released from jail. That is when he confessed and led police to a shallow grave deep in the woods of Duncan, S.C., according to news accounts.

Howard, a public relations professional, who worked closely with the police and tried diligently to get national press attention for the Huston case, says she was forced to tell Huston's mother, Simehehe, over the phone about the break in the case so that she wouldn't learn about it from reporters covering the case. The grieving mother says she does not want to discuss the case at this time.

"Whereas I was expecting us to find her remains, I think when my sister heard that news it really rocked her foundation," explains Howard.

Because of an expected prosecution, the medical examiner has yet to release Huston's remains. A memorial service was held for her last week. Figueroa's funeral was held Aug. 26.

Howard says Huston's case has opened doors for other missing people of color to have an advocate for media attention. The new Tamika Huston Foundation for the Missing, established by the Huston family, can be reached through TamikaHuston.com. It will provide resources to search for and draw attention to missing persons that the national media may ordinarily refuse to feature, says Howard.

She explains, "We really want to serve as a resource to those families particularly with an emphasis on families of African-Americans and Hispanic persons who are traditionally kind of left out of what the national media thinks are important stories."

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